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ABSTRACT

Two studies investigated the transferability of generalist social work practice skills and knowledge between rural and urban settings. Interviews with 20 social workers practicing primarily with low income persons in both rural (Las Cruces, New Mexico) and urban (Detroit, Michigan) settings focused upon social work skills, perceived strengths and problems of client systems, and preferred work situations/settings. Findings indicated empathy skills, conflict management, networking, coalition building, social action, linking clients to resources, collaborative skills, and the problem-solving process were used by both urban and rural professionals. Most social workers, both rural and urban, viewed clients as having a strong sense of family, strong religious beliefs, and extensive family supports. Rural social workers saw their clients as less affected by the consumer culture. All social workers saw gaining access to existing resources as a major client problem, along with transportation, child care, inadequate housing, and lack of meaningful job opportunities. Urban professionals indicated their clients had greater access to medical care. Both groups expressed satisfaction with the community context of their work. Responses from 246 alumni of 8 university undergraduate social work programs revealed no significant differences between urban and rural practitioners on their use of the generalist practice skills. (NEC)

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Linking Practice Skills For the Rural and Urban Poor

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Linking Practice Skills for the Rural and Urban Poor

INTRODUCTION

The social work profession has a long tradition of working with low income clients; however, in the past few years, curriculum in schools of social work have drifted more towards preparation for private practice with middle income clients. A notable exception to this involves baccalaureate social work programs that utilize the generalist practice model. Numerous articles regarding the rural and urban poor identify individual and community dynamics that are similar, including isolation of rural and urban poor, difficulty obtaining resources, low self esteem, and in may cases, being invisible to the rest of society. This paper will present practice skills that can be utilized in rural and urban poverty settings through the generalist

practice model. The empirical evidence suggests that the practice skills used in both settings may differ very little. Presented in this paper are two studies; one a national study of alumni of BSW programs and their use of various generalist practice skills in urban and rural settings; and, the other, an exploratory study of urban low-income people in the Detroit, Michigan area, and rural low-income people in the Las Cruces, New Mexico area.

BACKGROUND

Rural and Urban Poor

Poverty in America is many facetted, and pervades rural communities and urban areas. Approximately one fourth of the United States population, at one time or another, experiences income poverty; however, few are poor over long periods of time (Subcommittee on Oversight, and Subcommittee on Public Assistance and Unemployment Compensation, 1983, pp. 22-23). Persons who have persistently low incomes and who live in a community ranking in the lowest quadrant by per capita are extremely disadvantaged. Many of these persons live in rural settings (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1984). Rural communities as well as urban centers have faced recent economic changes that have forced communities into rapid deterioration (Jacobson & Albertson, 1987). County and state governments are being affected by the general economic situation. In addition to losing revenu the state government is being forced to take on a greater

burden of the social service program, due to federal cutbacks, while the poverty rate has inched up to the highest rate than at any time since 1967 (Hill, 1985). Organizations such as the Council on the Social Work Education and the National Association of Social Workers with their urban orientation have served to obscure the issue of rural poverty through a misunderstanding of it. There is a stereotype concerning the shift of poverty from rural to urban areas. Actually, this shift has not taken place. Rather, there has been a greater rate of decline in the incidence of poverty among rural dwellers (Hill, 1985). In-migration does not account for increased poverty among urban people, especially minorities (Wilson & Aparte, 1985). The rural poverty population represents 38.4 percent of all United States poor, yet rural people make up only 26.7 percent of the total population (Watkins & Watkins, 1984).

Rural poor face similar problems as urban poor in a variety of areas, including inadequate schooling, poor health, substandard housing, high rates of unemployment and long term underemployment. Rural and urban poor, alike, seem to be powerless, and it is our contention, that both groups tend to be isolated and have a difficult time gaining access to required resources and services.

Practice Skills

The rural social work literature suggests a wide range of skills ,including community development, understanding

health issues, and a systems approach to intervention, in addition to the traditional work with individuals and families. Throughout the literature are also references to values of urban versus rural communities. The standards of behavior in rural communities may differ from urban ones, including an emphasis on self reliance, preservation of local autonomy, helping ones neighbors, reliance on tradition, resistance to change, and respect for certain long standing and cherished institutions (Reul, 1971). Such value differences, however, do not abolish the similarities of conditions which, indeed, call for generalist practice skills applicable to many communities, groups, individuals and families in various geographic settings. Williams and Kornblum (1985) describe the life situations of individual adolescents from rural and urban communities alike and conclude that "limited opportunity is echoed in hundreds of conversations and interviews" (p.7), and that self-belittlement pervades the lives of rural and urban poor youth, although the styles and themes differ.

It is not the purpose of this paper to diminish the contextual differences between the rural and urban poor, but rather to investigate the transferability of practice skills and the extent of use of an ecological and holistic understanding of all client systems. Inherent in our purpose is to stress the needs of low income people which certainly actualize the purpose of social work. What may bring rural and urban practice together most strongly is a

common commitment to the poor. Inequities between the rich and the poor in this society are growing and are the core of our most intractable social problems.

It is with this background that we began exploratory studies in Detroit, Michigan's urban ghetto area and the rural area around Las Cruces, New Mexico. The other study was a national study of alumni from nine universities which teach the generalist model in their BSW programs, representing rural and urban campuses, both public and private in various parts of the country.

Our overriding research question was, are the generalist practice skills and knowledge transferable between rural and urban settings? The generalist framework for social work practice is considered by the Council on Social Work Education as the foundation of all social work practice, including specialities in the field of practices and with various population groups. The Council on Social Work Education Curriculum Policy for Accreditation of the Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Social Work Programs states the following regarding social work practice:

> "Social Work practice embraces multiple methods and models, including generalist practice and a variety of concentrations defined according to the size of the client populations and other means of classification. Social work practice occurs with individuals, families, small groups, organizations, and communities. This variety and range represent the current state of the art in social work practice" (Handbook of Accreditation Standards and Procedures, 1984, appendix pp. 7-8).

In spite of these requirements, the generalist model's

place in practice and its actual use by practitioner has not been extensively tested. Generalist practice has also been used synonymously with rural social work practice, yet the perspective is taught in all social work programs, rural or urban, and to students regardless of the geographical locations or desired place of employment. Therefore, testing its use and transferability seems necessary.

RESEARCH STUDIES

In order to more fully explicate the linkages between social work practice of rural and urban workers, two methodologies were employed to gain both quantitative and qualitative data. Since the exploration of linkages is a very new area, this design seemed most appropriate. It was important to talk personally to social workers about their practice and to quantitatively test the use of practice skills and knowledge areas as they are used by social workers throughout the country. Thus, face to face interviews and a national survey were employed.

Exploratory Interviews

Twenty social work practitioners (BSW's and MSW's) who practice primarily with low income persons in both rural and urban settings were interviewed utilizing a schedule which focussed upon a) social work skills, b) perceived strengths of client systems, and c) perceived problems of client systems. In addition, the practitioners were asked about

their own preference about work situations and work settings.

Social work skills

The extent to which selected social work skills were used by practitioners was examined vis-a-vis the interview schedule. Empathy skills, conflict management, net working, coalition building, social action, linking clients to resources, collaborative skills, and the problem solving process, all generalist practice skills are used by rural and urban practitioners.

Findings indicated no difference between the two groups. Empathy skills and the problem solving process were used the most extensively by both groups.

Questions pertaining to skill transferability are the heart of the national survey. The national survey replicated those of the exploratory survey and detailed findings are presented when the national survey is discussed later in this paper.

Strengths of the client systems

Social work assessments focus on the strengths as well as the perceived deficits of client systems. Assessments are the guidelines of intervention and must be both accurate and appropriate. The perception of the client's strengths is an element of both assessment and intervention, and client strengths are often the key to successful change.

Therefore, exploring the similarities and differences of clients' perceived strengths by social workers in rural and urban areas further illuminates the linkages between the two groups. A list of strengths associated primarily with rural people was presented to urban and rural social workers. The list was developed through those suggested by Reul (1971) in her book, Territorial Boundaries of Rural Poverty and consisted of the following: 1) strong sense of family; 2) family supports each other especially in adversity; 3) works hard at manual labor; 4) strong sense of pride; 5) less affected by consumer culture; and 6) has strong religious beliefs.

Both similarities and differences are striking regarding perceived attributes. Most workers, rural and urban, view clients as having a strong sense of family, strong religious beliefs, and extensive family supports. On the other hand, rural workers see their clients as less affected by consumer culture, while urban workers perceive the direct opposite. An orientation toward manual labor is seen as present to a much greater number among rural clients, and a sense of pride somewhat more present among urban persons. The common attributes serve to link the rural and urban client systems in an important way. For example, basic family strengths are perceived to be present among both groups as are strong religious values. Families are often the focus of work by generalist practitioners, and their adaptability to positive change can be tempered or,

conversely, encouraged by the relative strength of the family. Seeing urban as well as rural families as well-springs of support can assist the generalist practitioner.

It is not surprising that the rural worker views his/her clients as less affected by consumer culture, and that the urban workers' clients are perceived as more frequently affected. Consumerism, although widespread across the society, probably has less immediate and discernible influence on the rural poor. For the urban poor, the goods of the consumer culture are highly visible and tempting, but not attainable except through the illegal underground economy. Therefore, they may give cause for feelings of ineffectuality and may drive people toward antisocial behaviors.

Rural people have most likely experienced hard manual labor simply because holding an ax or a hoe is a prerequisite of survival. The urban poor, by contrast, may have less experience with manual labor because work of any kind is less obtainable. Yet, the sense of pride so often associated with rural people and with manual labor is not considered to be present to a great extent by the workers serving the rural poor. Perhaps the society's move toward greater and more complex technology has lessened the sense of pride of work unless it is highly technical and/or well paid.

Social Worker Delineation of Client Problems

Further linkages can be understood by comparing the similarities and differences between what urban and rural social workers enumerate as typical client problems. If problems are viewed as similar among the rural and urban poor, then it is logical that skills ought to be transferable from one setting to another as these problems are acted upon.

A potential client problem list was developed with content emerging from a literature search which contained sources relating practice in both rural and urban settings. The list is by no means exhaustive, but items were found many times as the practice literature was reviewed. The list included the following items: 1) Problems in gaining access to existing resources; 2) transportation problems; 3) inadequate housing; 4) child care problems; 5) inhumane treatment by the Welfare Department; 6) lack of caring by health care providers; 7) poor medical care; 8) lack of meaningful job opportunities; 9) extensive family problems; and 10) mental health problems, especially depression.

Findings indicate virtually no differences between the two groups. All workers, urban and rural, see gaining access to existing resources as a major problem of their clients. Further, rural clients may have fewer resources, but access to them for both groups is a looming problem. Transportation, child care problems, inadequate housing and lack of meaningful job opportunities were the other problem

areas in which there was complete agreement that these were most often experiences by clients. The only difference found between the two groups - rural and urban - was in the category of medical care. Urban workers saw their clients as having greater access to adequate medical care than their rural counter parts. Other problem areas such as inhumane treatment by the welfare department, extensive family problems, and mental health problems, especially depression were considered to be present by both urban and rural workers, but not universally so as in the cases of the other problems listed above.

Social Worker Preferences

Social workers in both urban and rural settings were asked, if they had a choice, would they prefer to work in an urban or a rural setting. Each urban worker indicated he or she would prefer an urban setting, while all but one of the rural workers listed a preference for a rural setting. Even though both groups saw social work as becoming more difficult because of increased paper work, fewer client resources, and more intense client problems, their answers reflected a general satisfaction with the community context of their work.

National Survey

Alumni from eight universities were selected for their diversity, including student body makeup, region of the

country, public, private and size of the school. All programs are accredited by the Council on Social Work Education. Basic demographic information was collected, including size of area population where alumni worked, sex, educational level, field of practice. Six hundred ninety-seven questionnaires were mailed to alumni of eight universities, and 246 completed questionnaires were returned. Twenty-five states and one foreign country were represented in the sample.

The form listed number a of generalist social work skills, and the respondents were asked to indicate how often, using a Likert scale, they utilized these skills in their social work practice. These were then cross tabulated with the area, the size of the population with which they worked, and then was collapsed to always, never and not applicable. Chi square and test of significance were then compared to the urban and rural practitioners.

Table 1 illustrates demographic information of the sample regarding rural and urban practice and the primary field of practice.

Findings

There were no statistically significant differences between urban and rural practitioners on their use of the generalist practice skills. Specifically, the skills which were examined included conflict management with families, where 65 percent of the BSW's said they always used it in their practice. Empathy skills were used by rural and urban

Table 1

Primary Field of Practice

Count / Row Pct / Col Pct / Tot Pct	FIELD: Family Service 1	Crim. Justice 2	Mental Health 3	Health 4	Developmentally 5	Aging 6	Child Welfare 7	Administration 11	Education 16	Row Total
Size 1										
Urban Over 200	52	11	27	32	18	11	35	1	1	188
	27.7	5.9	14.4	17.0	9.6	5.9	18.6	.5	.5	78.0
	86.7	73.3	67.5	86.5	78.3	68.8	74.5	50.0	100.0	
	21.6	4.6	11.2	13.3	7.5	4.6	14.5	.4	.4	
3	8	4	13	5	5	5	12	1		53
Rural Less than	15.1	7.5	24.5	9.4	9.4	9.4	22.6	1.9		22.0
	13.3	26.7	32.5	13.5	21.7	31.3	25.5	50.0		
	3.3	1.7	5.4	2.1	2.1	2.1	5.0	.4		
Column Total	60	15	40	37	23	16	47	2	1	241
	24.9	6.2	16.6	15.4	9.5	6.6	19.5	.8	.4	100.0

Chi-Square	D.F.	Significance
9.27811	8	0.3194

practitioners 98 percent of the time in direct practice. Computer skills were the lowest, although there were no statistical differences, those in the rural areas reported using them less, about 25 percent of the time. Collaborative skills were used 89 and 85 percent of the time and coalition skills were used less often, only about 45 percent of the time (see Table 2).

The use of social action was more prevalent in rural areas, rated at 81 percent of the time, versus 66 percent of the time in urban settings. While there was not a statistical difference, clearly a trend exists here.

Only 70 percent of the direct service practitioners said they work with more than just the individual or the family. They did not indicate any work with the community or other systems.

The other important statistic was that only 50 percent of the BSW's reported that they use the holistic or ecological perspective in their practice. One of the other findings was that there was misunderstanding of theoretical models and how often they are used. It was clear that BSW's have trouble understanding what theories are and how to incorporate them into practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

From the exploratory study and the national study of the use of the generalist model in practice there are several implications, particularly for teaching and rural

Table 2

Use of Collaborative Skills

Size	Count / Row Pct / Col Pct / Tot Pct	TEAM Always	Never	Not Appl-icable	Row Total
1 Urban, Over 200		167	20	1	188
		88.8	10.6	.5	77.7
		78.4	71.4	100.0	
		69.0	8.3	.4	
3 Rural, Less Than		46	8		54
		85.2	14.8		22.3
		21.6	28.6		
		19.0	3.3		
Column Total		213	28	1	242
		88.0	11.6	.4	100.0

Chi-Square	D.F.	Significance
0.98299	2	0.6117

practice: 1) there is a need for teaching an array of skills which are all interrelated; 2) there is a need to understand the context of person's lives in order to select skills, that is, there is a need for an ecological or holistic picture; and 3) there is a need to collaborate more. Coalition skills are needed to advocate for the common needs of low income people to arrive at their common development, and to assist in their community development. There is a need for understanding contextual issues to encourage leadership among low income persons regardless of their geographic setting. Although the differences between the life situations and contexts of the urban and rural poor are certainly different, their shared oppression as well as their enormous strengths should serve as the catalyst for the profession of social work to renew its commitment to the most vulnerable population.

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